

What's in a name? A Brexit we can all enjoy

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Change is a powerful notion in politics. A strong mandate for change can motivate all sorts of policy reversals and bring new ideas to fruition. Very often it does none of that at all. Frequently a perception of change is all one needs to feel reinvigorated and ready to take on the challenge of ... continuing business as usual. Sometimes, this is the case because change is not possible, or is unnecessary. It does not hurt however to pretend that a great shift is taking place, perhaps no-one will look.

On Monday, we were treated to the spectacle of Theresa May, still at the time of writing the British PM, arriving in Brussels to announce that a deal had been struck allowing the infamous Brexit negotiations between Britain and the EU to move from the stalled divorce proceedings to (what are soon to be stalled) trade relations and exit-transition discussions. The deal in question contained an agreement that Northern Ireland (the top part of the island of Ireland, that is part of the UK) would leave the Single Market and the Customs Union along with the rest of the country (as Brexit requires according to Mrs May), but while exiting the door, it would pivot and fall back into 'regulatory alignment' with the Irish Republic (and hence the EU). As one could say in German: *'Raider heißt jetzt Twix ... sonst ändert sich nix'*. One can still have their favourite sweet, and eat it, so long as they call it something else.

Such is the elegance of this solution, that one might be tempted to mistake it for a genuine policy innovation. In fact, using a made up name for something that you are already doing and calling it 'new' has a long pedigree and has been used aplenty. Most interestingly, the EU used exactly the same technique when it was trying to force a breakthrough in stalled negotiations with its previous intransigent partner, Greece, in the Spring of 2015. At the end of January 2015 the then minister of finance Yanis Varoufakis told the Eurogroup President Jeroen Dijsselbloem that the Troika inspectors were no longer welcome in Greece. The Greek population was jubilant. The trio of institutions (EU Commission, IMF, ECB) known as the Troika that were scrutinising Greece's every movement since the 2010 bailout agreement, were expelled. Greece had regained its independence. No longer would foreigners look over the shoulders of ministers as they were making budgetary decisions. In fact, the total lack of any real change was immediately obvious to anyone actually looking. Glorious headlines gave way to meetings at the Hilton and the Troika was renamed 'Institutions'. Greece had won its independence, business as usual continued, nobody looked, Raider became Twix.

Fast forward to December 2017 and Theresa May's efforts to drag the UK outside the EU, its Single Market and Customs Union. This can be achieved, we are told, through a regulatory alignment with the EU, and not just for Northern Ireland, but for the whole of the UK (as the effort to contain the deal to Northern Ireland faced local opposition from May's coalition partner, the DUP). As noted by a series of commentators, the Brexit saga follows closely the Greek tragedy of 2015. Brexit in name only is giving its place to Brexit

without even the name. In proposing regulatory alignment, the government seems to be adopting the Norway model for Brexit, something espoused as an objective during the Referendum by many a Leave proponent, yet ruled out by May in her Lancaster House Speech early in 2017.

What would 'regulatory alignment' mean anyway? The beautiful thing with such broad concepts is that they can mean everything and nothing at the same time, very much like Brexit itself. For the government this alignment will mean a successful Brexit, delivering on the Brexit mandate. It will be Twix twice over. For the EU it will mean continuation of the four freedoms and preservation of the integrity of the single market. For the rest of the world it will mean (with a bit of luck) business as usual. Why is luck needed? Britain needs everyone to accept that the 'whatever you want to call it arrangement' will be accepted as continuation of participation in the customs union by the WTO and the rest of the world. Otherwise a whole lot of problems may arise, bringing back the spectre of borders and tariffs. Theresa May needs everyone internally also to buy the story that she has delivered Brexit, and has fulfilled her own personal commitments, when clearly such an arrangement will deliver the softest of Brexits and will cross the government's own red lines a few times over. But do not despair, people like to see a headline that declares victory and get bored of the semantics. Greeks did, and voted for Mr Tsipras again back in September 2015. We all now like Twix don't we? Finally, a Brexit we can all enjoy.

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